

Shvilei Pinches

Parshas Vayera

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Parshas Vayera 5771

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Receiving the Torah in the Merit of the Mitzvah of Milah Teaches the Incredible Lesson that Torah Can Only Exist in One Who Sacrifices on Its Behalf

In our parsha this week, parshas Vayera, we read (Bereishis 18,1): **“וירא אליו ה' באלוני ממרא והוא יושב”**—“Hashem appeared to him in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day.” Rashi comments: **“וירא אליו, לבקר את החולה, אמר רבי חמא”**—“Hashem appeared to him, to visit the sick person. R' Chama the son of Chanina said: It was the third day since his circumcision, and the Holy One, Blessed is He, came and inquired about Avraham’s welfare.”

The Maharal of Prague explains in Gur Aryeh the difference between the pain experienced on the first two days after the circumcision versus that of the third day. On the first two days, there is most definitely pain and suffering, but it is localized to the area of the wound. On the third day, however, the entire body experiences weakness due to the pain and suffering. We find scriptural evidence for this fact concerning the people of Shechem, who were killed by Shimon and Levi on the third day after their circumcisions (Bereishis 34,25): **“ויהי ביום השלישי בהיותם כואבים”**—“And it came to pass on the third day when they were in pain.” For this reason, one is only considered ill on the third day when the entire body is affected.

A Feast on the Third Day After the Milah

It is a well-established custom, especially among tzaddikim, to also prepare a feast on the third day after the circumcision—to commemorate the feast that Avraham Avinu prepared for the angels who visited him on the third day after his circumcision. We find mention of this custom in Derech Pikudecha by the author of the B'nei Yissoschar: **“בהרבה מקומות יש מדרקקים לעשות גם כן סעודה ביום השלישי למילה, ויש לזה סמך מסעודת אברהם אבינו למלאכים דיום השלישי למילתו היה כידוע”**.

An additional source for this custom is found in the Hanhagas Maharshal written by his faithful student the author of the Mateh Moshe. He writes, astonishingly, that the feast on the third day is more important than the feast on the day of the milah itself: **“מורי מהר”ש אמר, שיותר גדול הוא סעודה של מצוה של שלישי למילה מיום המילה עצמה, שהרי שלישי למילה נאמר בה סעודה להדיא גבי אברהם, ויום המילה—עצמה נדרש גבי יצחק רק הגמל, וכן שמע מחמיו הרב קלונימוס”**—he notes that the fact that Avraham prepared a feast on the third day after his circumcision is described openly in the Torah; whereas, feasting on the day of the circumcision itself is only alluded to in the possuk. Let us examine the matter of feasting on the day of the bris milah and also on the third day afterward.

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The Covenant between HKB”H and Yisroel Is Based on Self-Sacrifice

Our blessed sages teach us an important principle concerning the feast that Avraham Avinu prepared for his three heavenly visitors on the third day after his circumcision. They teach us that HKB”H sent these three angels to visit Avraham, so that in the merit of the feast that he would prepare for them, Yisroel would receive the Torah. This is explained in the Midrash (S.R. 28,1) on the possuk (Shemos 19,3):

”ומשה עלה אל האלקים... באותה שעה בקשו מלאכי השרת לפגוע במשה, עשה בו הקב”ה קלסטירין של פניו של משה דומה לאברהם, אמר להם הקב”ה, אי אתם מתביישין הימנו, לא זהו שירדתם אצלו ואכלתם בתוך ביתו”

So, we must try and understand: (a) what is the connection between the angels eating with Avraham and Yisroel receiving the Torah? (b) why, indeed, did HKB”H arrange that Yisroel would merit receiving the Torah due to a meal that Avraham served the angels specifically on the third day after his milah?

To begin to explain all of this, let us first consider why HKB”H chose to base the covenant between Himself and Avraham Avinu and his descendants on the mitzvah of milah—as it is stated (Bereishis 17,1):
אברם בן תשעים שנה ותשע שנים וירא ה' אל אברם, ויאמר אליו אני אל שדי התהלך לפני והיה תמים, ואתנה בריתי ביני ובינך וארבה אותך במאד מאד”

This is the Torah of a Man Who Dies in a Tent”

The Maharal of Prague teaches us in Netzach Yisroel (Chapter 7) that the physical nature of the human body and the spiritual nature of the Torah stand in direct contradiction to one another. He writes:

”דבר זה ענין מופלא, כי התורה והגוף שהם שני הפכים, ואם כן איך תתקיים התורה שהיא שכלית בגוף גשמי, שהגשמי הפוך [הרוחני] הנבדל... ולפיכך אין תורה מתקיימת רק במי שממית עצמו על התורה”

For this reason, he concludes, Torah cannot exist in a person who is not willing to sacrifice on its behalf. This concept agrees with a teaching in the Gemorah (Tamid 32.). Among ten questions that Alexander of Macedon presents to the elders of the South is the following: מה ימית עצמו. מזה יעביד איניש ויחיה, אמרו ליה ימית עצמו. מה יעביד איניש וימות, יחיה את עצמו” —“What should a person do to live? They said to him, ‘He should kill himself.’ What should a person do to die? ‘He should enliven himself.’” In other words, if one desires to live a spiritual life based on Torah and service of Hashem, it is necessary to eliminate the physical, material character of the body; whereas, if he wishes to die a spiritual death, he should enhance the physical, material character of the body.

This helps us understand the events at the time of Matan Torah as described in the Gemorah (Shabbos 88:):
”אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי, כל דיבור ודיבור שיצא מפני הקב”ה יצתה נשמתן של ישראל שנאמר נפשי” —with every utterance and commandment from HKB”H, the souls of Yisroel left their bodies. Then the Gemorah inquires: ”ומאחר שמדיבור ראשון יצתה נשמתן, דיבור שני היאך קיבלו” —if their souls departed with the first commandment, how were they able to receive the following commandment? The Gemorah answers: ”הוריד [הקב”ה] טל שעתיד להחיות בו מתים והחיה אותם” —He resurrected them

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with the dew that He will use to resurrect the dead in the future. We are faced with an obvious question. Knowing that their souls would leave their bodies with each commandment, why did HKB”H choose to give Yisroel the Torah in this fashion?

We find the answer in the Gemorah (Berachos 63:): **”אמר ריש לקיש, מנין שאין דברי תורה מתקיימין אלא —במי שממית עצמו עליה, שנאמר (במדבר יט יד) זאת התורה אדם כי ימות באהל”**—Reish Lakish said: From where do we know that the words of Torah are not retained except by one who kills himself on its behalf? For it is stated: “This is the Torah of a man who dies in a tent.” A Torah existence requires self-sacrifice. As we learned from the Maharal, the material, physical world and the spiritual world stand in direct opposition to one another. Therefore, HKB”H gave Yisroel the Torah specifically in this manner—where their souls departed with each commandment. This was to teach all future generations the essential lesson that the Torah cannot exist in one who is not prepared to sacrifice himself on its behalf.

Entering into a Covenant By Means of a Mitzvah Associated with Suffering

The following are the words of the Rambam (Hilchos Talmud Torah 1,8), awe-inspiring words that each and every one of us should review morning and night:

”כל איש מישראל חייב בתלמוד תורה, בין עני בין עשיר, בין שלם בגופו בין בעל יסורין, בין בחור בין שהיה זקן גדול שתשש כחו, אפילו היה עני המתפרנס מן הצדקה ומחזר על הפתחים, ואפילו בעל אשה—all Jews, whether they are rich or poor, healthy or sickly, young or old, a husband who must support a family, are required to designate time during the day and during the night to engage in Torah study.

We now stand enlightened and can begin to comprehend why HKB”H chose to make a covenant between Himself and Yisroel specifically by means of the mitzvah of milah, circumcision—a procedure involving suffering and physical discomfort. We are being taught a vital lesson: if we wish to enter into a covenant with the Holy One, Blessed is He, we must be willing to serve Him even if it means enduring suffering and self-sacrifice. In the words of Reish Lakish: **”אין דברי תורה מתקיימין אלא במי שממית עצמו עליה”**—Torah cannot exist except in someone who is willing to sacrifice on its behalf!

One Can Only Acquire Torah by Means of Milah

This supports beautifully a teaching found in the Midrash (S.R. 30,12) demonstrating that only a person who has fulfilled the mitzvah of milah is able to acquire Torah knowledge:

”ואלה המשפטים, הדא הוא דכתיב (תהלים קמו יט) מגיד דבריו ליעקב, פעם אחת אמר לו עקילס [אונקלוס] לאדריונוס המלך, רוצה אני להתגייר ולהעשות ישראל, אמר לו לאומה זו אתה מבקש, כמה בזיתי אותה, כמה הרגתי אותה, לירודה שבאומות אתה מבקש להתערב, מה ראית בהם שאתה רוצה להתגייר.

אמר לו, הקטן שבהם יודע היאך ברא הקב”ה את העולם, מה נברא ביום ראשון ומה נברא ביום שני, כמה יש משנברא העולם ועל מה העולם עומד ותורתן אמת, אמר לו ולמד תורתן ואל תמול, אמר לו

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עקילס, אפילו חכם שבמלכותך וזקן בן מאה שנה, אינו יכול ללמוד תורתן אם אינו מל, שכן כתוב, מגיד דבריו ליעקב חוקיו ומשפטיו לישראל, לא עשה בן לכל גוי, ולמי לבני ישראל.

This narrative describes a dialogue between Onkelos the ger and his uncle Hadrian, the emperor of Rome. Onkelos informs Hadrian that he wishes to convert to Judaism. His uncle wants to know what he sees in this lowly people whom he has killed so many of. He replies that even the smallest amongst them knows how the Almighty created the universe, what sustains the world and that their Torah represents the truth. Hadrian suggests that Onkelos study the Torah without undergoing circumcision. Onkelos answers that even the wisest in the empire is incapable of learning their Torah without undergoing circumcision.

Based on what we have learned, we can understand why it is impossible to acquire Torah wisdom and insight without first fulfilling the mitzvah of milah. The Torah states clearly: **“זאת התורה אדם כי ימות באהל”**—“this is the Torah of a man who dies in a tent.” Reish Lakish derives from this verse: **“אין דברי תורה”**—“Torah cannot exist except in a person who kills himself on her behalf.” Therefore, only someone who has fulfilled the mitzvah of milah is able to acquire the Torah. For milah is the covenant between HKB”H and Yisroel by which a Jewish man demonstrates that he accepts upon himself to serve Hashem through pain and the direst of circumstances.

“And He Stood Over Them”

Revealing that Avraham Was Greater than the Angels

In this manner, let us proceed to interpret the dialogue that took place between HKB”H and the angels when Moshe went up to the heavens to receive the Torah: **“אי אתם מתביישין הימנו, לא זהו שירדתם אצלו”**—“Aren’t you embarrassed to be in his presence; isn’t he the one whom you went down to visit and whose house you ate in?” We will base our interpretation on a question posed in the Midrash (B.R. 48,14) referring to a possuk in our parsha (18,8):

“והוא עומד עליהם תחת העץ ויאכלו, הכא את אמר והוא עומד עליהם, ולהלן אמר (שם ב) נצבים עליו, אלא עד שלא יצא ידיהם נצבים עליו, כיון שיצא ידיהם והוא עומד עליהם, אימתו מוטלת עליהם מיכאל מירתת גבריאל מירתת”

The Midrash questions why in this possuk (8) it states that Avraham stood over the angels, while in a previous possuk (2), it states that they stood over him. We learn that, initially, the angels thought that they were greater than Avraham. Therefore, the possuk states: **“ווישא עיניו וירא והנה שלשה אנשים נצבים”**—i.e. the angels originally perceived themselves to be greater than Avraham and, consequently, viewed themselves as towering over him. After partaking of Avraham’s feast, however, they realized: **“והוא עומד עליהם”**—that he, in fact, towered over them. Let us examine how partaking of this feast led them to this realization.

As pointed out above, this encounter took place on the third day after Avraham’s circumcision—at the peak of his pain and suffering. The angels witnessed that despite his pain and suffering: **“ואל הבקר רץ אברהם ויקח”**—**“בן בקר רץ וטוב”**—he ran to serve his guests; he strived to fulfill the mitzvah of hachnosos orchim at any cost.

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Witnessing this, they became aware of the tremendous power of the tzaddikim who serve Hashem even through suffering and self-sacrifice.

This form of service of Hashem does not apply to the angels. They are purely spiritual creatures—free of disease, pain and suffering. Therefore, it was this feast, prepared at the height of Avraham's suffering, that revealed to the angels: **"והוא עומד עליהם"**—"he stood over them." They realized that Avraham Avinu was greater than them due to his ability to serve Hashem even through suffering—which they could not do.

We now understand the tremendous impact of HKB"H's reply to the angels. They wanted Hashem to grant them the Torah rather than to Moshe. So, HKB"H transformed Moshe's face into a likeness of Avraham's and He said to the angels: **"אי אתם מתביישין הימנו, לא זהו שירדתם אצלו ואכלתם בתוך ביתו"**—"Aren't you embarrassed to be in his presence; isn't he the one whom you went down to visit and whose house you ate in?" In other words, remember how he was ailing on the third day after his milah, and, nevertheless, he was willing to undergo self-sacrifice and tremendous suffering in order to fulfill the mitzvah of hachnosos orchim.

At that moment, **"יירדתם אצלו"**—you, the angels, went down in your own self-estimation. For, it was revealed to you: **"והוא עומד עליהם"**—that Avraham stands above you, since he is able to serve Hashem and perform mitzvos through pain and suffering, which angels cannot do. For this reason, the angels were made to understand that the Torah belongs to Yisroel, who are able to sacrifice on its behalf.

This sheds light for us on one of the purposes for celebrating with a feast on the day of a circumcision, in the manner that Avraham Avinu did: **"ביום הגמל את יצחק"**. We wish to follow in the footsteps of our forefather Avraham and to express our great joy at being able to serve Hashem even through suffering and self-sacrifice. This is the true covenant that binds HKB"H with Yisroel throughout history, in every generation.

The rationale behind the feast on the third day post-milah is clear as well. As the Maharal has explained, the entire body is weakened due the pain and suffering by the third day—as it is written concerning the people of Shechem: **"ויהי ביום השלישי בהיותם כואבים"**. Therefore, it is customary to prepare a feast on the third day, as well, when the painful effects of the circumcision are at their peak, in order to demonstrate once again our great joy. We wish to demonstrate our acceptance of the yoke of the sovereignty of heaven to serve Hashem even while suffering.

Thus, we prepare a feast on the third day after the circumcision following in the footsteps of our forefather Avraham. By so doing, we demonstrate as he did, that we desire to fulfill Hashem's mitzvos at any cost.